

Fighting hunger through church mobilisation: a case study of Living Waters Church, Malawi



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Living Waters, an indigenous Malawian church denomination, has mobilised its congregations to work with their local communities to fight hunger and poverty. Through 'Eagles Relief and Development programme' ('Eagles'), it is helping church leaders understand God's heart for the poor and the responsibility he gives his church to care for them. It is equipping churches with the vision, skills and attitudes they need to bring about long-term and holistic change. Most of these churches have few resources, but they start with what they have, even if it is only compassion.

Level of intervention

Living Waters Church has branches in every region, district and area of Malawi. 'Eagles' is operating nationally: about 49 of its 400 churches are now working with the poor in their local communities. 'Eagles' also engages with churches from other denominations, through the Evangelical Association of Malawi and by networking at local level.

Prospective users of the practice

Churches wanting to respond to God's call to help the poor, whether at national, district or local level can learn from Living Waters' experience. Church programmes, projects or departments, or even home cells and individuals, with a passion to see the church take up its mandate for the poor, can apply this to their situation. It also has key learning points for donors who are supporting, or plan to support, church action with the poor.

Problem addressed

Statistics showing the extent of poverty in Malawi include:

- 14.2% of adults are infected with HIV/AIDS
- 85% of the total population of 12 million is dependent on agriculture for survival
- there are more than 1 million orphans
- life expectancy is 38 years

In addition to this chronic poverty, Malawi faced a severe hunger crisis in 2001-2 from which the 'Eagles' programme emerged. This hunger crisis continued over the next four years due to erratic rainfall.

Despite years of foreign aid and development, which was vital to save lives, the overall situation in the country is deteriorating.

Purpose of the intervention

'Eagles' aims to mobilise churches and communities to work together to achieve holistic change.

Its vision is to work through existing structures of the church, like yeast, so that every local church can work effectively with their community to bring healing to the land (2 Chronicles 7:14), restoring communities physically, spiritually, environmentally, emotionally and materially. Its purpose is to bring lasting change to the whole country from the bottom-up, rather than relying on

outside interventions.

Context

In 2002, most new and Pentecostal denominations in Malawi were doing little or nothing to help the poor. At the same time the development departments of more established denominations were detached from the local congregations. Living Waters had previously set up a programme to work with children on the street, 'Chisomo Children's Club', but had done nothing as a national church to respond to the terrible food crisis facing the country.

Living Waters has a strong mother church in Blantyre, the largest city in Malawi. It operates through regional bishops who oversee the district leaders, who in turn oversee the local congregations. The regional churches, based in each of Malawi's four main cities, have more than 1000 members, almost entirely African, who represent the entire economic and social spectrum, but include many professional and skilled people.

At local level, churches are smaller and often have few resources. During the hunger crisis, numbers dropped at church services as people dedicated their time to scavenging for food. Most people, including the pastors and members, relied on food distributions. A culture of hopelessness and dependency, exacerbated by government handouts during party campaigns, prevailed.

History and process

Relief response

Living Waters' response to the food crisis began when its founder and leader, Apostle Stanley Ndovie, listened to concerns raised by members of the mother church in quiet discussions with him. He set up the 'Eagles' trust which began distributing food, with support from some UK partners.

While this was a positive step, members of the church with development experience also realised that it was a very short-term response and an expensive one that other agencies were better placed to perform. After listening to them and to feedback from beneficiaries, Apostle Ndovie asked Cathy James, who had helped the church set up Chisomo Children's Club and who had been one of the key advocates for effective church action, to set up a steering group to advise the church.

Core people for action

The 'Eagles' trustees were all busy people, with high standing in the church. Cathy set up a steering group comprised of people with specific expertise in agriculture, development, finance and law, as well as young and motivated pastors from the church with time to give. This group guided 'Eagles' throughout its early development and later became its official Board of Governance.

The group developed the vision, drawing both on their own knowledge and on experience and learning of others, such as the Evangelical Association network, and Tearfund through regional training in 'disaster mitigation'.

The steering group saw Living Waters' strengths as the scope of its influence (across every area of the country), its strong and visionary leadership, its pool of committed and able professionals in the central churches, and its enthusiastic young pastors in the localities. Its limitations were in its lack of development experience as a church, its lack of resources and in the fact that social action was not a priority. They agreed that:

- Eagles' main mission should be to mobilise the churches right across the country
- Eagles should also demonstrate an effective and specific response to the food crisis in one area to serve as a role model for their own and other churches
- The basis for all action should be the principle from the 'feeding of the 5000': starting with what you have and trusting God to provide, without waiting for external funding
- The work should be better than secular agencies: it should draw on the best knowledge and practice available but it should be directed, guided and empowered by God.

Steps in implementation

Envisioning and equipping pastors

The steering group planned and carried out a two-day seminar for Living Waters pastors in each of Malawi's three regions. One of the steering group members, Bertha Chunda, an experienced agriculture and development specialist, led the seminars with a consultant from another church. The steering group took responsibility for the organisation and liaison. Apostle Ndovie and the regional bishops also spoke. The seminars focussed on the biblical basis for working with poor people and on helping leaders generate ideas of how their churches could respond to the crisis, even if they

had no funds or resources. Pastors learned how to carry out very simple needs assessments, such as using guideline questions on the past and current food situation, making seasonal calendars to chart the monthly agricultural activities. They were then able to identify the key local needs and develop very simple action plans of their next steps upon returning home. These next steps included sharing their learning with leaders and members of their churches and considering how they could respond to needs in their own communities.

The teaching placed emphasis on liaising with development practitioners (church, government or non-governmental organisations) to draw on their expertise. The aim was for the pastors and subsequently, their congregations, to understand their responsibility to care for the poor, to become role models of good food security practices and to become change agents in their communities.

As a result of the training, most of the churches initially started small activities serving the community, including:

- church demonstration gardens to diversify crops and feed orphans
- drama groups to sensitise their communities on development issues
- wells to improve clean water supplies

Some churches that had members with development expertise engaged in further projects at this stage, including establishing farmers' clubs and community-based childcare centres. Many of these specialists had been hoping for opportunities to work with their churches to reach the poor.

Disaster response

Members of the steering group felt it was important to respond to the immediate crisis at the same time as demonstrating how to work effectively with communities. One of the worst hit districts in the country was Chikwawa, 60km south of Blantyre. Eagles worked with the local Living Waters church and government agencies there to identify communities needing urgent help. In Chikwawa, up to 98% of people had no access to food, and other agencies and churches were not working there. Drawing on Participatory Learning and Action methods, they helped four communities analyse their problems, define the root causes and develop action plans, even without any external funds. In February 2003, at the height of the food crisis, Eagles began working with one of those four communities, later extending the programme to a second. Each village from those communities prioritised their activities and chose one initial focus for change. Most decided to develop community gardens where they could grow more diverse and drought-resistant crops, such as cassava and sweet potato, and where they could learn to multiply seed; others decided to start by planting a wood lot to address problems of flooding and soil fertility.

Organisational development

During this period, the steering group gradually recruited staff and set up the systems and structures that it needed to work effectively, trusting God to provide the resources.

Eagles initially appointed Victor Mughogho as development officer. Later, Cuthbert Gondwe, a young pastor and a member of the founding group was also appointed as a development officer. These two people, supported by the steering group, worked tirelessly to make an impact in both programmes, even before Eagles secured transport or funding. At the same time, Eagles applied for funds to support the work, securing support from a range of donors for the Chikwawa project. The national programme continued with very limited funding from UK churches. By 2004, the team consisted of Victor, who became Director, Cuthbert who became Church Mobilisation Coordinator, a Finance and Administrative Officer, a Food Security Coordinator, a Health and HIV/AIDS Coordinator and two drivers.

Eagles also developed a constitution, delegating the trustees' management power to the steering group. Church members with specific expertise helped set up the financial systems and controls; and develop strategy.

Local church follow-up

Eagles consolidated the work with the local churches in a variety of ways:

- Eagles visited programmes started by local churches after the seminar, or talked through issues and problems on the phone.
- Eagles organised 'Social Action' Sundays at the mother church where people could hear about the impact of the work and Apostle Ndovie would preach a related message.
- Eagles took key church leaders to see the work in Chikwawa.
- Eagles successfully advocated for church leaders to allocate time for social action sessions and presentations at other church events, especially the Annual General Conference.
- Cathy and Cuthbert developed and taught a course on 'God's heart for the poor' for the Living Waters International Bible School. The course included a field trip to learn from the Chikwawa project. Eagles also gave these studies to some local churches to use with their home-cells.
- Eagles' staff and steering group members carried out continued individual and group advocacy with key church leaders, helping the regional bishops catch the vision.
- In 2004, this time with Tearfund support, Eagles organised a follow-up seminar for the pastors to assess their progress to date, to give them more technical input on the links between food security and HIV/AIDS and to strengthen commitment to, and quality and sustainability, of the work. The focus at this stage was on mobilising local expertise in the community, sharing good practice and building on the existing initiatives to develop more long-term and community-based programmes. 277 leaders from 156 churches attended this

- seminar, led again by Bertha, with an HIV/AIDS expert.
- As a result of these seminars, churches were able to improve the quality and sustainability of their programmes.
- Eagles also carried out district-level training for a wider range of leaders from the local churches, including 'resource people' (church members with development expertise), youth leaders and church development committees.
- Churches strengthened their development activities by drawing on this local expertise wherever possible, but also invited Eagles staff to give some specific training where it was needed, sometimes at district level or sometimes at community level.
- Eagles organised exposure visits between congregations and to Chikwawa, so that churches could see good practice and learn from each other.
- In 2005, Eagles held four regional workshops for 140 representatives from 67 churches who had achieved most by that time, reflecting on their programmes and how to improve and strengthen them.
- Eagles, supported by Geneva Global, gave small resource inputs to churches that were running their own programmes and had contributed their own resources, but needed a small boost to increase their effectiveness.
- Some churches received support through other local government or non-government agencies that saw the impact that they were having and helped them with seed, trees, boreholes etc.

National structure

As the impact grew and at Apostle Ndovie's request, Eagles developed a 'Social Action Policy' for the church, defining the responsibilities of each level of the church related to working with the poor. This included systems for follow-up visits, monitoring, reporting and for approving or turning down churches who wanted to request external support.

Eagles' strategy was to establish a small facilitative team in each of Malawi's three regions to provide follow-up for the churches, develop the capacity of the church at different levels and organise support through training, exposure visits and mobilisation of local resource people. In 2006, Eagles took the next step by setting up an office in the central region.

Duration

The church formed the Eagles trust early in 2002 but the long-term work through the steering group began in September 2002. The work is ongoing and expanding.

Resources

The national mobilisation work ideally needs funding only for a small team of salaried staff facilitators. Since external funding for the national programme has not been easy to access, however, Eagles has managed most of the work through Cuthbert, one driver and the support of the director, other staff and steering group members. The programme cost is on average £13,000 per year (approximately £250 per church).

Indicators for monitoring

- Number of churches participating
- Number of orphans and vulnerable children helped
- Number of elderly, sick, disabled or HIV/AIDS-infected people helped
- Number of young people participating in youth clubs
- Resources, time and money contributed by the local church
- Level of participation by other denominations
- Household food security statistics
- Under-five children malnourishment statistics
- Number and kind of community initiatives

Impact

Eagles' Chikwawa project achieved very significant impact: working with 11,000 people, it dramatically reduced under-five children malnutrition rates; carried out successful food for work programmes; and helped the communities diversify crops, mitigate against floods, establish community-based child-care centres, access government support and set up youth clubs.

In the national programme, Eagles helped 49 churches establish their own programmes, including:

- Farmers' clubs for HIV/AIDS affected families
- Community or church gardens for crop diversification and seed multiplication
- Youth clubs, sensitising others through drama clubs on HIV/AIDS and food security issues and organising youth activities, especially football
- Community child-care centres for under-five children
- Irrigation
- Wells or bore-holes for clean water
- Sanitation

- Advocacy
- Counselling
- Home-based care
- Orphan care
- Care for the elderly/ sick/ widows
- Adult literacy
- Tree- planting
- Integration of messages into church meetings, e.g. Social Action Sundays and sermons.

These interventions are reaching approximately 4000 of the most vulnerable people and children, as well as their families. In addition, Living Waters now recognises social action as one of the national church's key ministries.

Challenges

Scope

Although Eagles had few resources at the beginning, the steering group decided to work in all three regions at the same time. This was because, when the national leadership initially begun distributing food, their communication with pastors had already raised expectations that something would be done in each area. In addition, existing church structures and systems brought leaders from all the regions together regularly for conferences and teaching, which provided opportunities learning and follow-up. However, working in so many regions brings challenges in terms of monitoring churches and helping them to improve their effectiveness and retain their motivation.

Eagles addressed this challenge initially by using some of the consultants who had carried out the regional training seminars to help with follow-up; and then by helping each regional and district church develop its own systems for visiting and monitoring. Eagles continues to encourage the regional and district churches to review progress during their normal supervisory visits to churches. It also brings groups of churches together every year for further training; and embeds development teaching and feedback into every existing church conference or activity that brings leaders together.

Balancing crisis response with long-term mobilisation

The Chikwawa project has provided learning opportunities for others, while being a resource base for Eagles. It has raised the profile of the poor in the mother church. However, it has also involved the Eagles team in a project that needs a large amount of support and staff time. The steering group and staff have worked hard to retain the vision, balancing the under-funded national programme with the Chikwawa project. They have achieved this through regular strategic review and planning sessions, by making one of the Eagles staff responsible for the national programme and by taking time out of the office as staff to pray and listen to God.

Mind-set

Much of the church in Malawi as a whole had sub-consciously absorbed the prevailing mind-set of dependency, believing that, for things to change, you need external help and resources. Living Waters did not at first see ministry to the poor as important. Some saw it as a challenge to existing ministries. In addition, some leaders saw the programme as a potential way to resource other church ministries or as a source of power. Eagles addressed this issue, by developing clear policies and systems for using resources transparently and accountably, by focusing on demonstrating impact in the work and by continued advocacy with leaders at individual and group levels.

Donor attitudes and restrictions

The Eagles' vision needs a small number of salaried staff facilitators to help churches run sustainable programmes that do not depend on external funding. In a country as poor and fragile as Malawi, it is unrealistic to expect local churches to sustain the momentum and to resource their own programmes for the poor, without that facilitation.

Donors are reluctant, however, to fund salaries, travel and administrative costs. The Eagles approach needs donors who understand that, by funding a small but on-going team, they can achieve a much greater and more sustainable impact than through funding more 'visible' community inputs.

Critical issues and lessons learned

Involvement of key church leaders

Without Apostle Ndovie's support, Eagles could not have achieved such great impact. To achieve success, key leaders like him had to understand the vision, believe that God was asking them to follow it through and give their physical and verbal support.

Key personnel

Eagles' success also depends on identifying and drawing in key people as steering group members, consultants, advisers and staff who have not only expertise but also vision, commitment and spiritual maturity. All the staff felt 'called' to Eagles, though each had very good human reasons not to join.

God's empowerment

Eagles learns everything it can from good development practice, but at the same time, makes sure that its vision, direction and implementation is guided and empowered by God.

They achieve this by:

- Holding staff/ steering group prayer times within and outside of the office, especially when there is little time available and they are busy.
- Prophecy: one key example was a picture God gave Cuthbert of all the NGOs in Chikwawa going round in endless circles of project activities that were not changing anything. God instructed Eagles not to join that circle but to get into the centre and make an impact.

Church structural links and separation

Eagles found that they must walk a tightrope, fully involving church leaders in the programme – its vision, implementation and impact – but at the same time, separating management of finances and strategy from official church structures. This helped keep clarity of focus on the needs of the poor and to protect resources from being diverted to other church programmes, especially where pastors had limited understanding of the importance of financial systems and those systems were weak.

Values-based

Eagles clearly defined its values and incorporated them in everything: induction, strategy reviews and implementation. They were:

- Passion/ commitment for the work
- God's leading and empowerment
- Empowering and holistic development
- Integrity and accountability
- Love and respect without discrimination

Effectiveness

The work that Eagles has done with the churches has resulted in two levels of intervention

- The church works with the community and together they define, run and monitor the work.
- The church carries out more welfare-type programmes on behalf of the poor.

Eagles believes both these are vital: local churches are able to identify and support those who are too weak or marginalised to benefit from development activities; but churches can also develop the capacity to work with their communities to achieve long-term and holistic change. As they do this in Malawi, they can transform the nation.

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